

Hotel online reviews put operators to test

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After a December visit to Amara Creekside Resort in Sedona with her husband and young kids, a Phoenix woman let the boutique hotel know what she thought of the place.

The beds were comfortable, the concierge helpful and the fire pit perfect for roasting marshmallows. The view from her room, though, was awful, and there were slim pickings in the lineup of complimentary DVDs. Bottom line: It was just OK, even at a fraction of the usual rate.

She sized up the hotel not on a traditional comment card or its newer e-mail cousin. She posted an online hotel review at TripAdvisor.com.

The travel site is wildly popular with vacationers and business travelers planning a trip or just back from one, with more than 4 million first-hand reviews and related reports from the front lines.

But it also has attracted a loyal following among the subjects of the reviews. Hotels and resorts mindful of their reputations in this era of do-it-yourself travel planning can't afford to ignore this growing force.

Comment cards are invaluable, read religiously and here to stay, but Internet postings carry a punch they don't: they are public.

And often very detailed, down to the brand name of the bathroom towels and the cost of the breakfast buffet.

A string of positive reviews could persuade a hotel shopper to book a particular place; a bunch of lukewarm or negative ones might give them pause or keep them away.

"Word of mouth is everything. It's more important than anything," said veteran Valley hotelier Tom Silverman, co-owner and general manager of family favorite Chaparral Suites Resort in Scottsdale. "People want to hear personal experiences."

Managing the chatter

It's not just travel, of course. There are Internet message boards, forums, online reviews and blogs dedicated to everything from computers to cars, college savings plans to individual stocks.

Internet researchers and consultants have studied the trend and given it a name: consumer-to-consumer, or word-of-mouth, dialogue. On Monday, Jupiter Research published a report, "Managing Word of Mouth Online," on how businesses can stay on top of Internet chatter about their products or services. The first two tips: monitor consumer dialogue frequently and share the findings throughout the company.

Silverman and his staff monitor TripAdvisor regularly, he said, "but probably not often enough."

Mary Mantle, area director of sales and marketing for Pointe Hilton Resorts, said they look at the posts several times a week.

"It's another vehicle for listening to our guests," she said. "It's a part of our business environment today."

Kevin Johnson, general manager of Amara, said he and the 3-year-old hotel's chief operating officer look at the reviews three or four times a week. Most are very good, helping give the hotel a No. 6 ranking among 37 Sedona hotels rated on the Web site.

"It's a very good gauge of our guests' perception of their stay," he said.

Johnson contacts those who provide contact information with their review. Most are anonymous, though.

Were the anonymous Phoenix woman to return to Amara - her report said she only stayed there because Hyatt put her family there for \$40 as part of that chain's timeshare promotion - she would find a stocked selection of DVDs.

Johnson said he went to a video store in Sedona and bought \$500 worth of previously viewed DVDs after seeing the post. Amara usually restocks them two or three times a year as they wear out or disappear but had fallen behind during the holiday season.

In April, the resort replaced the carpeting in the lobby, hallways and other public areas. Some reviewers on TripAdvisor had complained about worn, stained carpeting. ("The public areas of the hotel are in need of a paint touchup combined with a good carpet cleaning," one said.)

"I think the trick with TripAdvisor is, and it's not necessarily a trick, guests want to know that their comments are heard," Johnson said.

Tom Kelly, general manager of the luxury Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale at Troon North, started perusing TripAdvisor about six months ago.

"I kept hearing more and more about it," he said.

He and other hotel executives said it gives people who don't want to talk to a manager or fill out a comment card another option.

"Some people feel more comfortable putting their comments or thoughts on a Web site like this, which is fine," he said. "We consider it certainly legitimate and helpful."

If not always easy to swallow. Last month, one reviewer from Utah gave the resort one star (out of five) based on a December stay. The subject line of her review: "Not up to par."

"I felt like I was at a nice apartment complex, not an upscale hotel. Staff was Marriott so-so. The room was by a busy street. Couch was old and stained. Desk told me they ordered new ones, will be there in a couple months. Cleaning service was poor. Manager was M.I.A."

The headline on another recent one: "Great Service. Nice Property. Crappy Beds."

Kelly said the bed comment surprised him because so many guests love the beds so much they order the same model for their house.

The Four Seasons Scottsdale doesn't get too many thumbs down. It is ranked No. 1 out of 81 hotels in Scottsdale on TripAdvisor.

Taking action

Hotel managers all say they play the percentages when it comes to guest feedback.

"If the overwhelming majority are good, well, then you know you're doing pretty good," Silverman said.

"But here's the thing," he quickly adds. "You've got to react to the legitimate gripes and take care of them. They're telling you what's wrong and shame on you if you don't take care of the problem."

One traveler's problem is a mere annoyance or even off the radar for others, of course. Someone who travels with a mobile sound soother (it's come up on TripAdvisor) is likely to be much more sensitive to noise and put off by loud neighbors or a room by the parking lot than the average guest. Then there are expectations. And budgets. And travel experience.

"What I would caution people about is not to use it (the online reviews) as the bible, the end all to end all," Kelly said. "Because every experience is going to be different. It's one person's opinion."

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